

FLY TREASURES



Paul Schmookler

THE GRAND MASTER OF THE FLY



In 1997, I was introduced to Paul Schmookler through his glorious books on fly-tying materials used in salmon and other fishing flies that he produced with Ingrid Sils. When my wife Janet presented me with a deluxe edition of *Rare and Unusual Fly-Tying Materials: A Natural History*, a two-volume set bound in beautiful blue half morocco and exquisitely marbled paper, I experienced my first inkling of something rare, and yes, unusual.

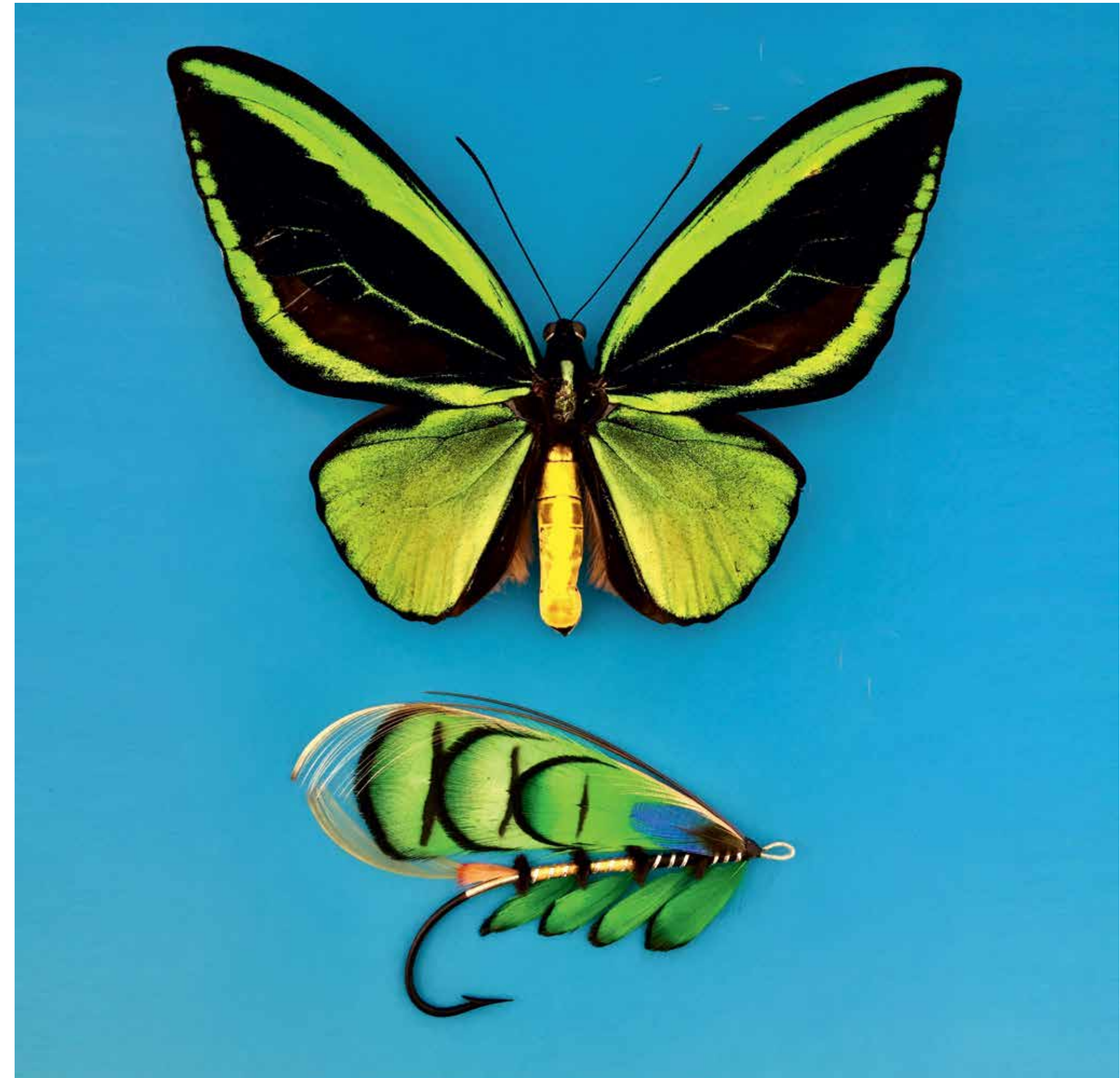


Reading these volumes, I was amazed at the aesthetic beauty of the photography, the vast store of facts and the descriptions of flies and materials that just leapt off the page. What kind of a person can master the production of such a chef d'oeuvre of 632 pages of rare flies and the most exotic materials in the world, all captured in the finest print reproduction on the planet?

The journey through the pages of this masterpiece was one that I shared with thousands of fly tiers and fly collectors, all of us in awe, wondering how such a treasure could have landed in our laps. Who is this Paul Schmookler and how can he possess everything that we all collectively covet and want to own—the rarest, most beautiful flies and as importantly, the story behind their very creation—the natural history of one of the oldest sports known to man?

I would see Paul over the years at many of the leading tackle shows and auctions, and as the merry band of collectors, dealers and aficionados of antique tackle migrated from the auction rooms to the Internet, Paul's worldwide following expanded.

Their publication of the *Art of Angling Journal* from 2001 to 2006 was clearly an artistic success, introducing readers to a host of leading bench tackle craftsmen and fly tiers. As with the earlier books, the journal was elaborately illustrated and printed in Hong Kong, and the back issues have become collector's items. Unfortunately, this labor of love was doomed financially as the magazine's business model was challenged by the downturn in print advertising.



SO, WHO IS PAUL SCHMOOKLER?

Paul is variously described as “a genius,” “eccentric,” “egotistical,” or “mercurial,” but the term I would proffer is emblazoned in his trade brand itself: “rare and unusual.”

He is an individual who is both controversial and revered in the antique tackle trade. The very “yin and yang” of his character places him at the center of a field that is defined by both creativity and tradition.

Trying to advance creativity and innovation in a craft that is hundreds of years old, he was variously challenged and valued for his contributions. But Paul has paid homage to the history of the fly tying and has learned many valuable lessons from it.

As a market maker and as someone positioned at the forefront of the next era in antique tackle collecting, he is a tastemaker to a diverse, global band of millionaires, craftsmen, tinkerers and sportsmen who just may be as eccentric as he is.

Paul’s nature is to forge forward and to cultivate and celebrate the very best and deride the mediocre and over-rated.

His path to becoming the leading authority on antique salmon flies began simply enough at a young age when his father purchased a 20-acre camp on Lake Memphremagog in Canada, where Paul would set out minnow traps at night. This early introduction to aquatics and angling and a childhood passion for butterfly and insect collecting soon led him to take up the fly rod and then start tying flies as a teenager.

Childhood interests often develop into life-long passions, and the collector’s quest to recapture fond youthful memories is often reflected in the objects that they collect.

When Paul went to college at Midwestern University in Dennison, Iowa, his outdoor interests came to include upland bird hunting for pheasants. Years later, he secured a job collecting and preparing a wide range of biological specimens including insects, amphibians and small mammals for Carolina Biological and Wards Scientific. In the early 1970s he met the proprietor of The Butterfly Company in New York who was an avid collector of exotic bird specimens.

So, now, Paul’s passions started to merge: fly fishing, butterflies, fly tying, birds and exotic feathers. In addition, living in New York City, one of the world centers for leading fly fishermen, fly tiers, outdoor authors and artists, Paul soon joined a small group of influential fly fishermen and fly tiers.

This group included Charles DeFeo, Jim Deren, Alex Rogan—all of whom were passionate salmon and trout fly tiers, anglers and collectors. Schmookler tied flies for Jim Deren, the owner of the famed Angler’s Roost, then a mecca for well-heeled fly fishermen.

There are many stories too numerous to mention about Deren, the famously irascible proprietor who ruled the Roost, but one is illustrative:

One day when Paul was in the back tying flies, he heard a customer enter the shop, a new potential client he had referred earlier to Deren. Jim barked his usual greeting of: “Good day. Now, how can I help you?” and the chap told him he was headed up to the Beaverkill and needed some Quill Gordon flies to fish it.

Jim then told the customer that he was gravely mistaken, and that at this time of the year, a Hendrickson pattern would be the best way to match the hatch most successfully. Unfortunately, the customer was not buying Jim’s recommendation, and demurred, insisting on Quill Gordons.

A verbal tussle ensued and finally, Jim refused to serve the gentleman. Leaving in a huff, the potential client still had to stand patiently awaiting the elevator in full view of Deren, eyeing him via the pizza window in the shop. Finally, exasperated, the man could only blurt out an anguished: “What is wrong with you, anyway?”

To which Deren simply replied curtly and matter-of-factly: “I told you already. I don’t have any Quill Gordons. I only have Hendricksons!”

Located in New York City’s Chrysler Building, The Angler’s Roost was a powerful magnet for the fly fishing elite of the 1960s and 1970s, being a short walk from the storied Abercrombie and Fitch flagship store, where many a fly fisherman was outfitted with the finest fly-fishing tackle at that time. After all, the Catskills were a short two-hour drive from Manhattan, and the cradle of American Fly Fishing, with Theodore Gordon and other early flyfishing pioneers.



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1. The Harmood-Banner Collection



THE HARMOOD-BANNER COLLECTION:

But it was a stunning collection of antique British salmon flies that brought me back to Schmookler’s door. Tracking this collection from the North East Antique Tackle Show, to the Internet, to its origins in the British Isles, via Manhattan and back to Massachusetts became my quest. A tale of obsession, searching and yearning that put me as a collector on the trail of something so rare as to defy explanation.

I had first seen the Harmood-Banner collection at one of the Northeast Antique Angling Shows, when it was put on display for attendees to enjoy. Collectors marveled at the beauty and completeness of the collection and wondered out loud about where it could possibly have come from?

The Harmood-Banner Collection is a collection of 528 classic British salmon flies housed in a glass-front, 22-drawer mahogany case, the bottom of which sits atop a 23rd drawer that contains an 1895 first edition of George M. Kelson’s *The Salmon Fly*. The book is signed: “Major Harmood-Banner, Caerhowel” and contains three salmon flies tied by Kelson himself with a hand-written label.

The inscription in the book became a story in itself, as I was able to help Paul track down information on the collection’s proprietor, Major Harmood-Banner, whose estate, Caerhowel, was listed in the British Listed Buildings. Major Harmood-Banner was, by trade, an accountant. He was Chairman of the Liverpool and Harrington Water Company, and then Chairman of the Liverpool Gas and Coke Company. He served as a city councilor. His accountancy firm, Harmood-Banner & Co., grew to be one

of the most respected British accounting firms, and was the predecessor company to the global firm Coopers & Lybrand (now Deloitte).

A search of antique tackle and book auction records confirmed Harmood-Banner’s keen interest in salmon fishing, through the sale of both a large carved 23-pound salmon by P.D. Malloch, and the appearance of his book-plate in several antique salmon fishing books.

The Harmood-Banner salmon fly collection is among the world’s finest reference collections of antique salmon flies, with each fly meticulously tied by one of the premier tiers of the day. The collection is invaluable as a reference as many of its 19th century original patterns are found in pristine condition, tied with authentic materials.

For any student of the salmon fly-tying craft, there is great value in being able to examine a specimen first-hand to note the nuances that a fly tier added to the dressing, for instance, instead of seeing a photograph. Likewise, the ability to compare first-hand how different tiers of that era interpreted a particular pattern is also instructive.

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1. Deluxe limited edition of Paul Schmookler and Ingrid Sils’ *Rare and Unusual Fly Tying Materials: A Natural History* with reference fly plates with original materials 2. William Baigent’s *A Book of Fly Hackles for Fly Dressing* with original hackles, 1937 3. Exotic bird skins, materials, flies, rare books and reels from Paul Schmookler’s private library

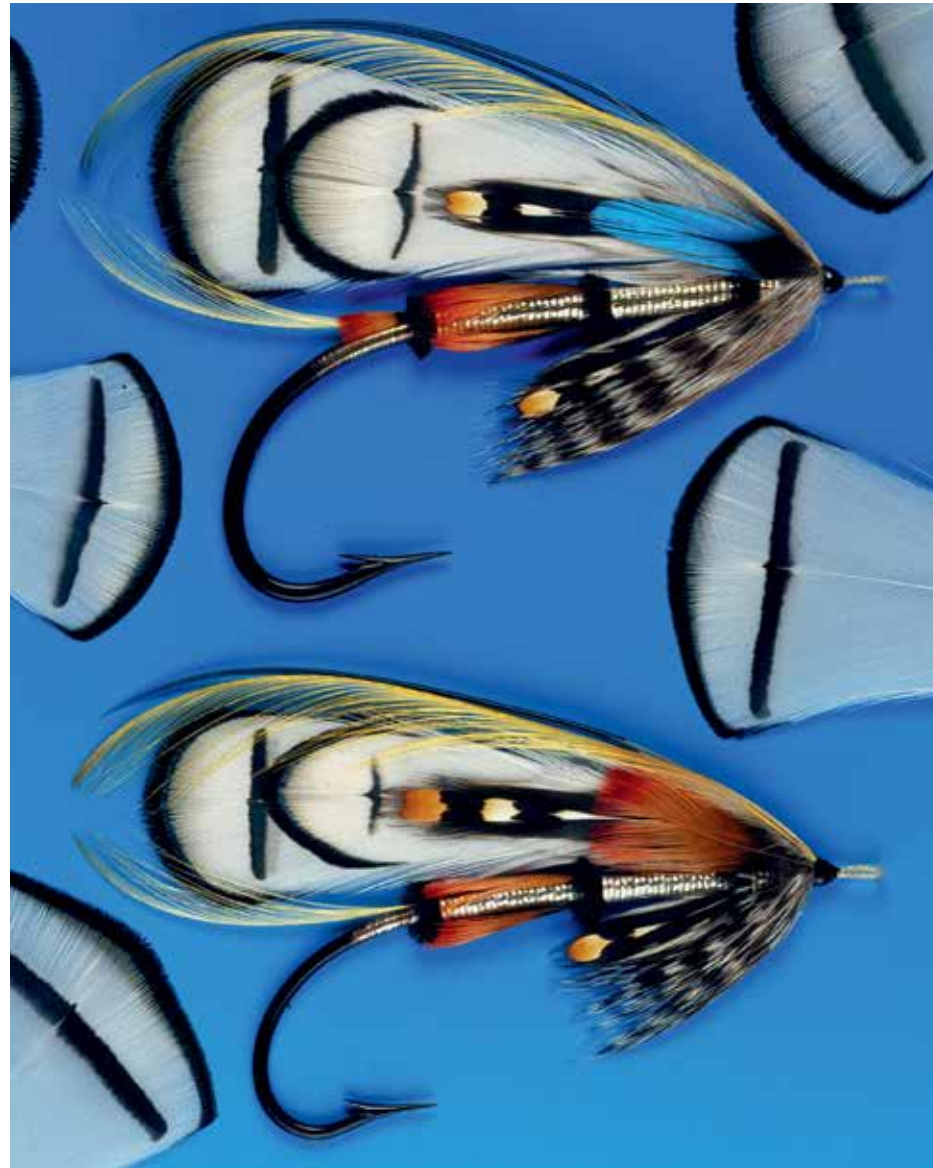
How this particular collection made its way across the Pond is an immigrant's tale. Alex Rogan of the storied Irish Rogan fly tying family brought the collection to the United States. From there, it was passed through the hands of Jim Deren at the Angler's Roost to Charles DeFeo, the famous illustrator and fly tier and then on to Paul Schmookler through DeFeo's estate.

Charles DeFeo was both a fine fly tier and a talented commercial artist whose work was featured in Seagram's calendars and many magazines such as *Fortune* and *Field & Stream*. He was a friend of the famous artist Norman Rockwell and taught Preston Jennings to tie flies.

Preston Jennings is best remembered for *A Book of Trout Flies* (1935), one of the first and best American books to present angling entomology from a lucid, academic viewpoint: identifying stream insects by their scientific names and presenting corresponding dressings for artificial flies.

Schmookler tied regularly with DeFeo and his friend M.O. Porter, who later became executor of DeFeo's estate, and he frequently visited Alex Rogan, who was his barber. Living in New York City, Paul traveled regularly to the Catskills to fish and over the years, befriended, fished with, tied with, or corresponded with a veritable constellation of angling and fly-tying personalities such as Walt and Winnie Dette, Harry and Elsie Darbee, Poul Jorgenson, Ernest Schweibert, Vincent Marino, Megan Boyd and Preston Jennings, amongst others.

Charles DeFeo introduced Schmookler to many members of the famous Anglers' Club of New York, and he tied full dress flies for many of them for their salmon fishing expeditions to Canada, Norway, Iceland, and other angling trips around the world. These outstanding tiers in New York and leading salmon fly fishermen became Paul's "professors" of the fly-tying and angling arts.



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1. Variations of the Corinthian fly created and tied by Paul Schmookler 2. Schmookler Autumn fly 3. Schmookler Bhutan Glory fly 4. Schmookler Danny fly

THE DEMISE OF DAME STODDARD'S AND THE EXOTIC MATERIALS "TREASURE OF SPARTA":

Schmookler developed a life-long interest in exotic fly tying materials through his now defunct insect and butterfly collecting activities and his work with the proprietor of the Butterfly Company in Far Rockaway near New York City, a shop that was a mecca for lepidopterists and bird collectors. The owner, Aminadov Glanz, once introduced Paul to Nikita Khrushchev, the former Soviet Union's Premier Minister in the 1960s, who happened to be an avid butterfly collector. Khrushchev, who decided to take advantage of Paul's diminutive size, lifted him in the air with his famous bear hug when they met.

Glanz also traded in exotic study skins culled from scientists and collectors around the world and Schmookler benefitted from this trade during a time when the fly fishermen and fly tiers of New York City were more focused on trout.

In one of the most important finds of Paul's career, a friend of his mentioned that 92-year-old Anna Shields, daughter of John Shields, the deceased fishing manager of the storied Stoddard's shop in Boston, was liquidating items from his house in Brookline, Massachusetts prior to its being demolished.

Stoddard's, founded in 1800, is the fifth oldest shop in Boston, and in its heyday, as Dame, Stoddard & Kendall, was the premier outfitter and sporting goods supplier to the region's fly fishing and hunting elite. As the "Harrods of America", its customer list famously included the likes of Winston Churchill, Red Sox player Ted Williams, and Julia Childs, who shopped there for cutlery.

John Shields was the originator of “Shields’ American Improved Gut Leader” and was featured in Mary Orvis Marbury’s *Favorite Flies* book (1892) as the inventor of the Moose Lake fly. He maintained an active correspondence with many of the world’s best fly tiers at the time and supplied them with materials via mail order.

When Paul arrived on the scene, the house in Brookline had been pretty well picked over, but there were six large wooden barrels sealed with wax left deep in the cellar recesses. As a favor, Paul agreed to take the barrels, gratis, in return for clearing them out of the basement.

Schmookler loaded up the barrels and brought them to his home. He stored them for a time in his basement, then decided one day to see what they contained. As he broke the black wax seal on the first barrel, he couldn’t believe his eyes. The barrel was filled from top to bottom with layer-upon-layer of exotic bird skins and plumage of the rarest varieties.

In the barrels, Paul found macaw parrot, teal, kingfisher and other bird skins tied in large bricks with hemp from India where they had landed from South America, Central America, Asia and Africa, during the British Colonial period in the 1880s. At the height of the British Empire, these skins were collected from all over the world, sent to England, then sent to India for processing, then returned to Britain for sale and distribution.

There were speckled bustard feathers, Indian crow, chattering, jungle cock, Cock of the Rock, Florican bustard, birds of paradise, golden pheasant crests and capes, Lady Amherst pheasant—all very exotic and rare, sought-after materials for salmon fly tiers around the world. An entire barrel was filled with bustard feathers and another with jungle cock necks, the prized feathers of which are used to imitate eyes on many fly patterns. All of these materials

found their way to the leading British catalog supply houses of the day, and then on to Stoddard’s.

As Paul puts it: “Opening up those barrels, it was like finding the Count of Monte Cristo’s Treasure of Sparta. I became responsible for them, for these great treasures.”

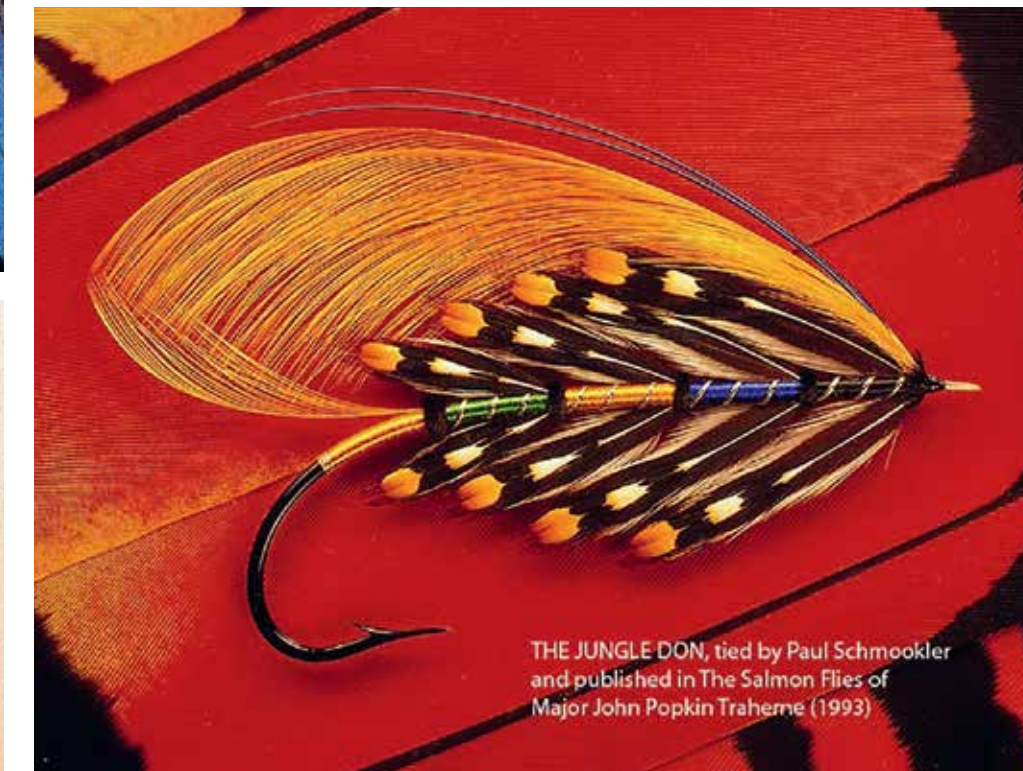
Ironically, these barrels had been marked for return to the United Kingdom, deemed in the late 1880s by John Shields to contain inferior grade materials, never officially accepted by Dame Stoddard’s according to its very high standards.

Over the next several decades, the Stoddard stock became the stuff of legends, as classic salmon fly tiers around the world sought to tie the original British and Irish patterns with the most exotic, most beautiful rare materials. As these birds were declared endangered species and the trade in contemporary skins of exotic birds became greatly restricted by law, the antique materials became the last source for the authentic dressing of classic salmon flies of the Victorian period.

Schmookler was able to tie with the finest existing and authentic 19th Century materials, to his heart’s content, and to pursue his quest to create the most elaborate and richly adorned classic and artistic fly patterns.

Thus continued a lifetime passion that united his knowledge of ornithology, entomology, and ichthyology, with a fine artist’s obsession to use only the finest materials in their creations.

Paul has since become known as the pioneer for an entire generation of creative fly tiers around the world who use the most exquisite materials to fashion artistically stunning flies of great beauty.



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1. Schmookler Black Argus fly 2. Schmookler Evangeline fly
3. A wide variety of rare bustard feathers 4. Schmookler Jungle Don fly



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1. Schmockler Morpho fly and butterfly 2. Salmon flies tied by Belarmino Martinez (1919-2000), notable fly tier from Pravia, Asturias, Spain 3. Antique Nicholson pattern salmon flies 4. Schmockler Peacock Pheasant flies 5. Antique Popham pattern salmon flies with a portrait photo of their namesake Francis Popham

FLY FISHING, ENTOMOLOGY, AQUATICS AND THE NATURAL SCIENCES, AND THE ANTIQUE BOOK COLLECTING WORLD

Paul Schmookler, always an avid reader and researcher, often prefers to reference the original 17th, 18th, or 19th century texts in search of information on particular patterns or fly-tying materials and their historical etiology.

As with his salmon fly tying, and work with exotic tying materials, Paul soon took his passion for angling books to a new level, haunting the auction rooms and antique bookstores around the world in search of the rarest volumes.

His search for specific, historically important angling texts, is methodical and deeply entwined with his knowledge of the natural and scientific world.

He followed, in part, in the footsteps of great collectors such as G. Albert Petit, whose collection was auctioned by Christie's and Sir Jocelyn Stevens and John Simpson, whose collections were sold by Bonhams, but he has also forged his own distinctive philosophy on collecting antique angling books.

For instance, instead of focusing only on collecting the rarest editions of Izaak Walton's *Compleat Angler*, Schmookler did exhaustive searches for the primary texts that informed Walton's opus.

This quest journeys back to the original volumes in Latin and Greek, and from early natural scientists such as Conrad Gessner's *Historiae Animallum* (1551), and Pierre Gilles (Petrus Gyllius), who translated the work by Aelianus from its original Greek into Latin (1533), and Pliny (1601), to discover the intellectual genesis for

Walton's work. Walton was fascinated by the interplay between early scientific thought on entomology, zoology, biology, and ichthyology and the sport of angling.

One could argue, as Schmookler does, that Walton's primary contribution to the angling community was to marry early knowledge of insects with those of sport fish to inform the angler and to determine a code of conduct for sport fishermen that would be in harmony with nature.

The search for the volumes that Walton perused in composing his work on the contemplative man's recreation has brought Schmookler to a deeper understanding of the influences of the great early scientific thinkers. Many of these thinkers and early scientists suffered greatly for their beliefs at a time when the genesis of life via divine creation was the accepted religious and philosophical norm.

Schmookler then follows the development of fly-fishing as a sport with scientific roots through the early work of Ronalds in 1836 and then Halford in 1886, with the introduction of scientific nomenclature for individual insects married to the development of early fly patterns.

Should other angling bibliophiles wish to pursue their passion along similar lines, Schmookler has assembled a bibliography of the 50 top antique angling books based on this selection criteria. He has also included many later texts, and those that include original flies and materials, a tradition he and other fly tiers and authors have carried on with their production of elaborate deluxe editions including flies.

In the collecting of antique angling books, condition is paramount. The motto: "Condition, condition, condition" is not too extreme to describe the standards of the top collectors.

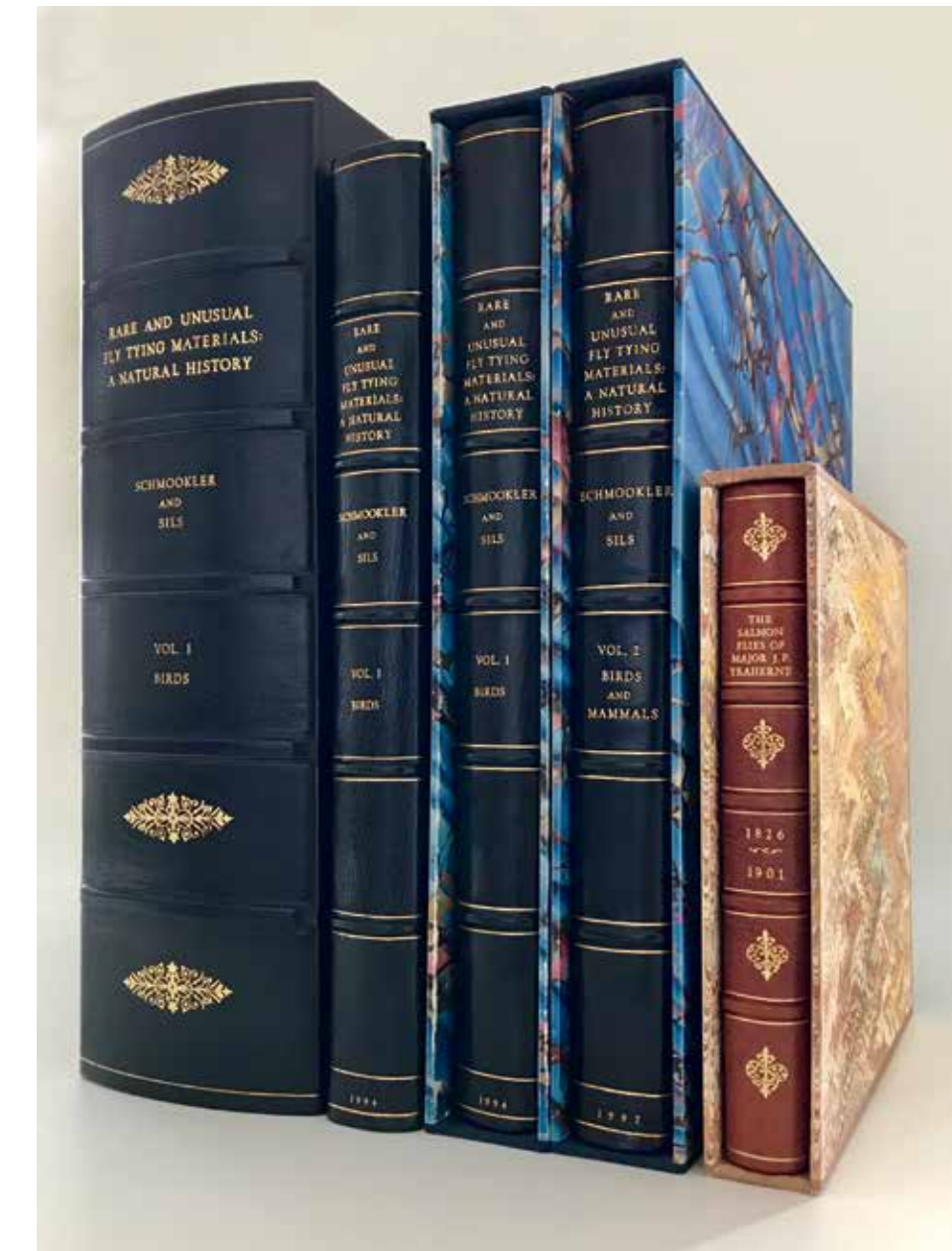
To claim top prices, antique angling books must be free of any blemish inside or out, of any foxing or excessive toning on the pages, any washing or repair to the pages, or of any nicks, rubs, or tears to the bindings. Any missing pages, sections, plates or other original features or pagination carry major penalties.

While there is less of a penalty for new bindings versus original ones, books must be maintained in as natural an original state as possible. All issues affecting the condition of the book need to be carefully explained.

Provenance can also increase the value of a book, especially if a personal inscription to a key master or historical figure is included, or if a great author or fisherman owned the work. Certain books with famous owners' bookplates are in demand, and unique marginalia written in the margins by the author or by other famous writers can also be of interest to collectors.

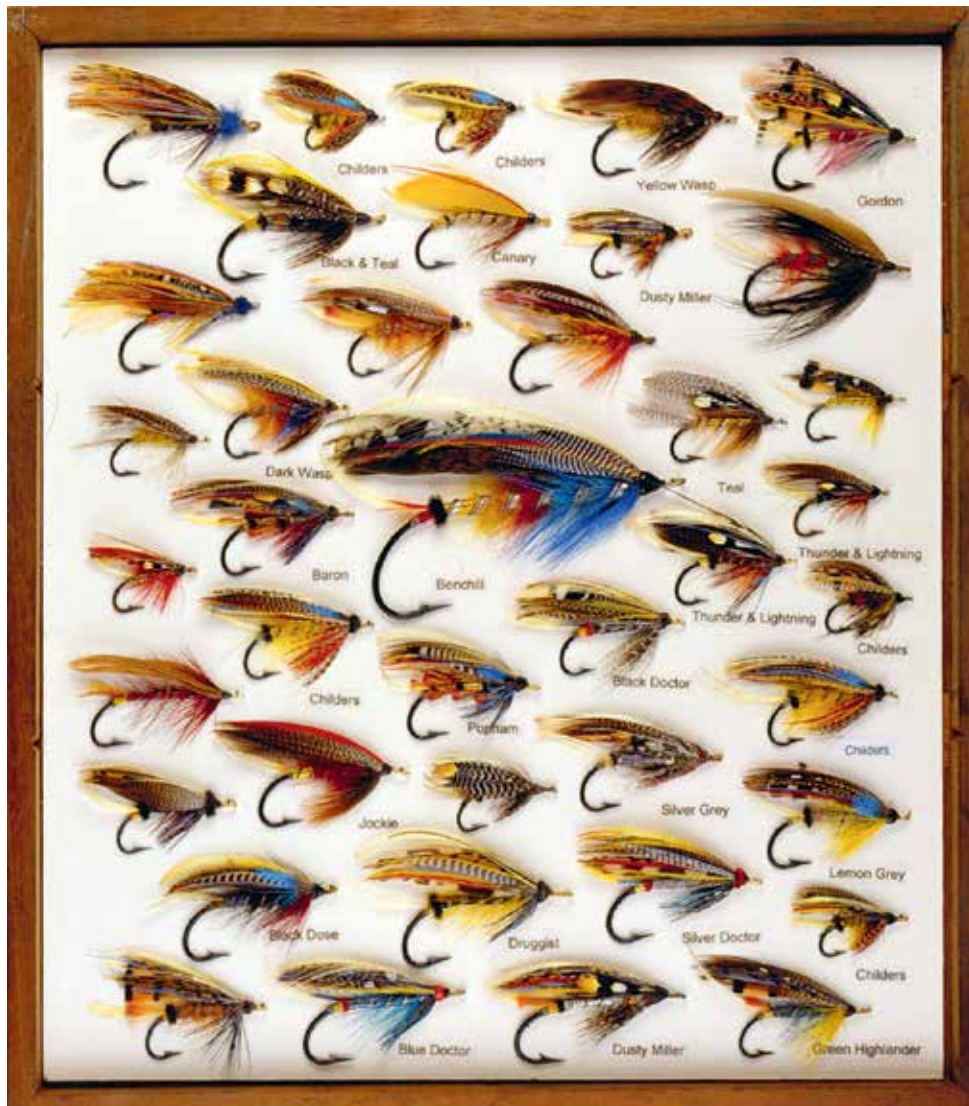
SO, WHO IS PAUL SCHMOOKLER?

He is a Victorian-era adventurer and scholar who finds himself in the late 20th and early 21st Century, sparking a renaissance of creative exhibition fly-tying to the delight of a global audience of fly tiers and fly collectors.



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1. Deluxe limited editions of Paul Schmookler and Ingrid Sils' books: *Rare and Unusual Fly Tying Materials: A Natural History*, Vols. I and II, and *The Salmon Flies of Major J.P. Traherne*



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1 and following pages: The Harmood-Banner Collection

PHOTO CREDIT: All photographs by Paul Schmookler and Ingrid Sils

